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SUBJECT: Karzai Shows Strength in Herat Rally

REF: KABUL 1662, KABUL 1663, KABUL 2260, KABUL 2303

¶1. (SBU) Begin Summary. In an August 14 campaign rally in Herat City (Afghanistan's second largest city), President Karzai drew a capacity crowd of more than 10,000 people, and demonstrated a show of unity among local and national powerbrokers. Flanked by Ismail Khan, FM Spanta, Herat's Ulema Shura Chairman Mullah Khodadad Saleh, MP Mohaqeq, a Hazara and head of the Afghan People's Movement, Governor Nuristani, and Provincial Council Chairman Dr. Azizi, Karzai stressed the achievements of the past seven years in infrastructure (mentioning the Ring Road, a USAID project in Herat province), education, health, government structures. Signs above the speakers during the rally captured the unmistakable unity theme Karzai sought to project: "All ethnic groups of Afghanistan are brothers and equal." Karzai reportedly was pleased with the successful rally, and his campaign will be well positioned to utilize the presence of a diverse group of powerful backers in the final days of campaigning before the election. Still, many commentators in Herat were less enamored by this show of unity, as reflected in cartoons circulating in Herat that satirize the perceived deals Karzai and Ismail Khan have made for jobs and power. End Summary.

Friday Rally at Capacity

¶2. (U) Karzai spoke at a two-hour campaign rally prior to Friday prayers in Herat's main stadium on August 14. The large capacity crowd (easily 10,000 and probably more) filled the stadium and was enthusiastic and overwhelmingly male (but there was a small women's section of about 200 women in burkas and chadors, and included many Pakhtuns). White doves were released when Karzai appeared. Hundreds in the crowd waved Afghan flags. And Karzai ventured briefly into the crowd to shake hands, surrounded by security guards. Supporters not just from Herat city but from most of Herat's 15 districts, many bussed in especially for the occasion, were in attendance.

¶2. (U) Karzai flew in by helicopter amidst the tightest security in Herat in several years. After the Qur'anic opening, Karzai's campaign manager in Herat Dr. Homayoun Azizi (and Provincial Council Chairman, who is not running for reelection) introduced the President. Karzai delivered a stemwinder, complimenting liberally Herat and Heratis, praising the dignitaries on the podium with him, reviewing his seven-year record of accomplishments, and stressing Afghans setting their country right, not foreigners. Karzai stressed the achievements of the past seven years in infrastructure (mentioning the Ring Road, a USAID project in Herat province), education, health, government structures (functioning Parliament, Provincial Councils, etc.). While urging the audience to participate in the election, Karzai did not directly ask for their votes.

Ismail Khan Present, But No Endorsement

13. (U) Despite prior indications that former governor and warlord in Herat Ismail Khan would throw his support to Karzai at the event, Khan was indirect in his support. Khan spoke briefly without directly asking his supporters to vote for Karzai; he focused his remarks on developing Herat, stating more roads would be asphalted and electricity extended into the districts -- a not very subtle reminder of his signature accomplishments in Herat city when he was warlord/governor and had almost exclusive access (to the detriment of the central government) to the sizeable customs revenues at the border crossing point with Iran.

Key Local Leaders Line up Behind Karzai

14. (U) Provincial Ulema Shura Chairman Mullah Khodadad Saleh, an active Karzai campaigner, also spoke. Additionally, signaling support across ethnic lines, MP Mohaqgeq, a Hazara and head of the Afghan People's Movement, accompanied Karzai from Kabul and spoke last at the event. On the platform were Herati FM Rangin Spanta and Herat Governor Nuristani, neither of whom spoke. Karzai made reference to how happy he was to have two Herati native sons with him on the platform, i.e., Ismail Khan and Rangin Spanta.

15. (U) One of the largest billboards at the stadium (and also erected overnight prominently at the entrance to the downtown park where the stadium is located) showed Karzai, next to Ismail Khan, next to Spanta, with "All ethnic groups of Afghanistan are brothers and equal" written above their heads. Others showed Karzai with his two VP nominees, Fahim and Khalili, Karzai alone in national dress and before a map of Afghanistan, and one nicely customized to Herat of Karzai in front of the two thousand year old Citadel. Some of the banners at the stadium bore these slogans: "Hamed Karzai: Symbol of Afghan Unity," "Afghanistan: Proud and Developed," "A Vote for Karzai Means Opposition to War and Conflict," "Today's Election is Tomorrow's Guarantee."

RTA Devotes Long Segment to Rally Coverage

16. (U) Local RTA evening news on the evening of August 14 led with a ten-minute feature on Karzai's stadium campaign rally. Unlike its coverage of the other major presidential candidates (Abdullah Abdullah, Ashraf Ghani, and Mirwais Yasini) rallies in Herat, RTA actually broadcast footage of the candidate speaking, rather than just commentary. And after the regular newscast RTA carried a ten-minute excerpt of Karzai speaking.

Governor says Karzai Pleased With Rally; Speculates on Khan Deal

17. (SBU) Governor Nuristani told State PRT Rep that Karzai was very happy with the rally. Karzai reportedly told the Governor it was both the largest and most enthusiastic crowd he has had this campaign season. Nuristani discounted observations that Ismail Khan had only given lukewarm support for Karzai and said Khan supports Karzai. Ismail Khan, at least as of Aug 12, was still seething at the appearance of a cartoon circulating on the streets of Herat, which he called "blasphemy" and which he believes is the work of Abdullah campaigners. The cartoon, entitled "Karzai comes to Herat," shows Karzai riding a donkey, whose face is Ismail Khan's and with FM Spanta pulling the reins of the donkey. Cartoon captions satirize the widely believed deals Karzai and Ismail Khan have made for jobs and power.

18. (SBU) Earlier the Governor (strictly protect) had told State PRT Rep that among the deals between Karzai and Ismail Khan is the appointment of a strong Ismail Khan supporter as mayor of Herat after the election; reportedly the Independent Directorate for Local Governance (IDLG) has already prepared the paper work. Still, Governor Nuristani suggested Ismail Khan does not have as much influence in Herat as he used to, saying that people at the rally were not listening to his speech and were starting to leave the stadium.

Security Ensures Incident-Free Event

¶9. (SBU) Karzai's Herat campaign stop came off without a security incident. The Governor confirmed all stops were pulled to secure Herat for the rally. Troublemaker Ghulam Yahya Siwashwani (AKA Akbari), who operates in villages in Guzara district just 20-30 km from Herat city, sent around a shabnamah (night letter) the eve of Karzai's visit boasting that he would stop Karzai from coming to Herat. However, the evening after Karzai left seven 107 mm rockets were fired at the Herat airport, one impacting near a runway, causing ISAF to close the airport to all aircraft until 1500 August ¶15. Ghulam Yahya, as he has done before, is believed to have fired off those rockets.

Comment

¶10. (SBU) Karzai appears to have greatly improved as a public speaker. Speaking without notes, employing rhetorical devices, playing to the Herat crowd, and using expressive hand and arm movements, Karzai delivered a good speech, at least the excerpt shown on RTA. The fact that Ismail Khan did not come out and directly endorse Karzai leads some observers in Herat to speculate that negotiations are still continuing between Karzai's camp and Ismail Khan over senior jobs and power arrangements for himself and supporters. The Governor believes otherwise, that the deals have been cut already. Whatever the truth, the powerful billboard showing Karzai and Ismail Khan side by side (and with FM Spanta) and the fact that Ismail Khan appeared on the platform with Karzai will no doubt be used by the Karzai campaign to suggest he supports Karzai.

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